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ABSTRACT

There are social forces exerting a tremendous influence that would, unchecked, remove humanistic elements from the teaching and learning of language by imposing a narrow set of basics--those skills that can be measured and which threaten to become the whole, very minimum, curriculum. The "Essentials of Education," a statement developed by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in reply to the basics advocates, encourages sustaining the essentials in language arts. This policy would work to sustain and rediscover America's rich cultural pluralism, by respecting the dialects and languages students bring to school while still sustaining standard English. Students' right to read is another essential that must be sustained, by defending their right to make informed and mature choices for themselves. Research is essential because without it the teaching profession has neither the knowledge to effect significant change in the teaching of language arts nor the facts to respond to its critics. NCTE's affirmative action thrust is essential, because it asserts humanism. Its many assemblies and commissions, as well as the programs and initiatives of earlier presidents, are essential because they are directly related to the improvement of the teaching of English. (HTH)

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SUSTAINING THE ESSENTIALS

Inaugural Remarks: Robert Squires, 1980 President,
National Council of Teachers of English
Oneonta High School, Oneonta, New York
Prepared for delivery November 23 at the General Session Brunch
70th Annual Convention, National Council of Teachers of English
Cincinnati, Ohio

We stand, if you will forgive the cliché, on the brink of a new decade, the decade that includes 1984, the year of George Orwell's technological, impersonal, dehumanized world. We are close enough to 1984 to be able to see that the world Orwell prophesied will not arrive on cue. However, it is clear that there are social forces exerting a tremendous influence which would, if we don't resist them, remove humanistic elements from the teaching and learning of language by imposing a narrow set of "basics," those skills which can be measured, and which, therefore, threaten to become the whole curriculum, a minimum curriculum indeed.

In so far as basic competency testing establishes a learner's master of symbol systems in language and mathematics and the ability to organize data and ideas for effective communication, I applaud, but because the movement tends to ignore the richness and complexity of learning, and until research indicates that mastery of these competencies is a lasting mastery, I insist on the right to remain skeptical of minimum competency tests and programs.

In my own state a dozen or so associates in the bureaus of reading, English, and mathematics are forced by law and their superiors to expend their time, energy, and considerable talents on the administration of minimum competency tests. In the utopia I imagine there would be, not a few dozen, but hundreds of such people working in the field helping teachers at all levels develop lessons and activities designed to implement and achieve the goals set forth in "The Essentials of Education." But,

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as my friend Jane Hornburger of Brooklyn College reminds me, "a basic curriculum requires only a basic budget."

Equality of educational opportunity should not mean the same education for all with each student first mastering a narrow and minimum set of competencies with the brighter ones then moving on to the enrichment provided by those studies not covered in a basic or minimum curriculum. Rather, equality of educational opportunity should mean that each student receive an education according to his or her needs and talents.

Central to the education of all students, of course, is an understanding of language for it is the tool by which all of us acquire, process, and manipulate information and ideas. Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer has written,

> I affirm the centrality of language not as an end in itself but as a vehicle by which all other education is conveyed, and as the mechanism by which all social encounters are sustained, and which gives us our identities and our meaning.

And so I have chosen as my theme for 1981 "Sustaining the Essentials." I refer, of course, to "The Essentials of Education," a statement that replies to the advocates of basics, and which now has the endorsement of twenty-two national subject matter and generalist educational organizations.

Since you have the statement in front of you, I will quote only very briefly from it. This is my creed and the educational essential I want to see upheld:

> The interdependence of skills and content is the central concept of the essentials of education. Skills and abilities do not grow in isolation from content. In all subjects, students develop skills in using language and other symbol systems; they develop the ability to reason; they undergo experiences that lead to emotional and social maturity. Students master these skills and abilities through observing, listening, reading, talking, and writing <u>about</u> science, mathematics, history and the social sciences, the arts and other aspects of our intellectual, social and cultural heritage. As they learn about their world and its heritage they necessarily deepen their skills in language and reasoning and

> acquire the basis for emotional, aesthetic and social growth. They also become aware of the world around them and develop an understanding and appreciation of the interdependence of the many facets of that world.

This afternoon, NCTE's Commission on Curriculum is beginning deliberations on a draft of "The Essentials of English." I hope every one of you will join me in lending that group support and encouragement for what could be the most important professional statement in the coming decade.

One day last month as I was working on this speech during a class's personal journal writing day, I looked up at that room full of bright and creative, relaxed and confident, industrious and inquisitive ninth graders. Suddenly I was struck by the realization that they are the class of 1984. I cannot bear the thought that they should be touched by even a miniscule percentage of Orwell's monstrous vision.

At that moment I saw my mission more clearly than I have ever seen it. My mission is to help them train themselves in clear and logical thinking and expression without destroying their independence and individuality of thought and spirit. I must help them to come to terms with a serious, sometimes grim, world without taking away an iota of their ability to take delight in it. In Future Shock, Alvin Toffler has stated my mission admirably. It is to increase every student's "cope-ability," every student's facility to adapt to constant change.

In addition to "The Essentials of Education," there are several "essentials" that we language arts teachers must also sustain, some of them established policies of the National Council of Teachers of English.

It is essential that we work to sustain and even rediscover our rich cultural pluralism. For too many decades this nation has tried to eliminate or to isolate in ghettos and on reservations non-English cultures. Much of the richness of European, Oriental, African, and Native American cultures has already been lost. It has been forty years since five-year-olds whose only language was Italian were automatically assigned to the retarded classes in Oneonta, New York, but as a

nation, we still have not learned to cultivate and to cherish the contributions that cultures outside the mainstream have to make. Only in our eating habits do we encourage cultural pluralism.

Although America is a nation with only one official language, it is time that we acknowledge what airlines and manufacturers have long recognized. America is a nation of numerous languages. Indeed we are a nation of several dialects of English. Certainly we must sustain standard English. A working knowledge of standard English is essential to all but a few of our students for it is necessary for their achievement of vocational and economic goals. Whether we like it or not, language, both oral and written, is, along with personal appearance, an element by which individuals are evaluated in our society. We would be derelict in our responsibility to our students if we didn't sustain this essential.

But it is also essential that we respect and value the dialects and languages that our students bring to school; they have an expressiveness that can enrich English. My Cornish grandmother died when I was six and with her death I lost a dialect that I have since regretted not knowing. But my father and my uncle were carefully educated to shun those marvelous Cornish rhythms and metaphors. In a world that is rapidly shrinking, it is both arrogant and self-destructive for us to continue to behave as though standard English is the only language worth sustaining. Teachers of English are teachers of language, and we should be interested in all language, not just one language, or one dialect of that language.

One essential that we must be increasingly vigilant to sustain is our students' right to read. In this endeavor we have as allies all of our colleagues in the other disciplines. One of the more interesting books to be attacked recently is Making It with Mademoiselle. It is a collection of articles on dressmaking from Mademoiselle magazine. Although such silliness is rife, most censorial attacks are far more serious. I cannot and will not defend salacious and prurient writing,

but I will support and defend the right of my students to make informed and mature choices for themselves. And I will fight those who would remove history textbooks which recognize the role Blacks and other minorities played in the Westward Movement and books like Black Boy and The Grapes of Wrath because they are something alleged to be un-American.

Six aspects of NCTE are essential to our vitality, and perhaps even our continued existence as an organization. I am talking about the Research Foundation; SLATE, Support for the Learning and Teaching of English; our publications, both books and journals; the affiliates; our commissions, committees, conferences, and assemblies; and our affirmative action program. These are all solidly established programs, but I need to be constantly reminded of their importance in my professional life and perhaps you do too.

Research is an essential because without it we have neither the knowledge to effect significant change in our teaching of the language arts nor the facts to respond to our critics.

SLATE is an essential because it is potentially our surest and fastest mechanism for responding to criticism of our profession and to ill-conceived attempts to change and shape it through hasty imposition of new curricula and certification standards.

Our publications are essential because they disseminate regularly and relatively permanently the best of the profession's thinking and knowledge about the teaching of English to thousands of teachers who rarely or never can attend a conference or convention.

The affiliates are essential because NCTE alone cannot meet the needs of teachers for programs and publications. NCTE's National Relations program has been effective at the national level, but we must support and sustain the affiliates which individually understand and can therefore be effective in their own states and regions.

Our commissions, committees, conferences, and assemblies are essential because they give breadth and depth to the Council and because the fruits of their deliberations are directly related to the Council's major purpose, the improvement of the teaching of English.

NCTE's affirmative action thrust is essential, not because the law requires it, but because it asserts our humanism.

Finally, I am going to remind you of the essentialness of the work and themes of my closer predecessors in this office, those people who have been and will continue to be my mentors in the Council's work. Their themes and the programs they shaped and implemented are essential to the Council's purpose and vitality, not just for one year, but for always. As part of my "Sustaining the Essentials" theme, I intend to see that the excellent initiatives of earlier presents are not lost.

In 1974 Margaret Early made us aware of the importance of strengthening the affiliates and of paying more than lip service to the principles of affirmative action, both essential priorities that I have already mentioned. The following year Steve Dunning conceived SLATE, which I have also discussed earlier.

In setting the theme "Beginnings" for 1976, Charlotte Huck said:

> I want to assure you that I think the primary purpose of NCTE must be to improve the quality of living and learning in <u>all</u> our classrooms from the kindergarten through college. Schools at <u>all</u> levels must be exciting, stimulating places that students <u>want</u> to attend.

In 1977 Charlotte Brooks continued that concern for students through her theme "Working Together." She said:

> I'd like the National Council of Teachers of English to gather together all of its resources, investigate all of its strengths and use all groups and individuals within it for a purpose. That purpose is to see that all students learn to use and to enjoy the English language and its literature. I'd like the focus to be the arts and skills of reading and writing, especially

> for those students who have been unsuccessful. I will not--I cannot--separate talking and listening and understanding from reading and writing. I ask you now to look at what has happened in our profession, to examine carefully what is happening now, and to work together for the creation of a successful future for those students.

In 1978 Marjorie Farmer set the theme, "Widening the Circle of Communication," and her program led to the establishment of NCTE's National Relations program and the drafting of "The Essentials of Education." In inaugurating her theme, Marjorie said, "While we have the critical attention of the community, let's practice the communication skills we teach, so as to make our professional purposes known to all who will hear us."

For 1979 Yetta Goodman introduced the theme, "Respect for the Learner," a theme that infuses and informs all of NCTE's work. In setting her theme, Yetta said:

> The right to an education for children and youth must include the right to an environment conducive to learning, free from ridicule and scorn. People--as infants, children and developing adults--are always trying to make sense out of the universe, to organize and conceptualize the surrounding world. Only if this search or inquiry can be supported, nurtured, helped along in a positive way will the learner want to continue learning from those of us educated to show others the way. This takes respect on our part for the learning capacity of every human being.

And this year Alan Purves set the theme, "Unity in Diversity." Just one year ago in San Francisco Alan said:

> Diverse as our students may be, diverse as we may be, we should not allow diversity to breed divisiveness. Within our diversity lies a unity of purpose and it is on that unity that we should build. Our organization is aptly named a Council, a bringing together of people to deliberate and consider, to advise each other and other colleagues in English and in related disciplines, and to advise the public--our employers and our governors. As a Council we should seek to give the best advice in our power--as we do in our publications and conferences--not to seek the glib answer or take the defensive posture. As a Council we should strive for honesty and high purpose.

Whatever the future of the National Council of Teachers of English may be, everything I have discussed today is essential to our work and to the well being of our students. I fervently hope that beginning now, every teacher of English and of language will adopt "The Essentials of Education" as her or his personal creed and as a Bill of Rights for every learner.